Christmas Day 2011

Is 9: 2-7; Titus 2: 11-14; Luke 2: 1-14

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So it's Christmas at last, and I hope it's begun for you happily, and not too early. It's a day we prepare for, for so long, a day of peace and delight when we stop work to celebrate the human possibility revealed in Christ, and when we love to give gifts in imitation of God's generosity.

And yet it's a sign of our human muddle that even as simple a thing as giving and receiving a gift becomes a problem for us.

To take a non-Christmassy example – the playwright George Bernard Shaw was browsing in a second-hand bookshop and found a copy of one of his own books. He was not pleased, and even less pleased when he found, on inspection, that it was a signed copy he had especially given to someone. So he bought the book and sent it to him with a note saying, "It gives me great pleasure to present you with this book – again". (I'm not sure whether, second-time around, it really was a gift, or more of a blunt instrument.)

2

A word we use a lot at Christmas, when we try to express what's special about it, is the word *glory*. It's a word which appears over and over in the readings and carols –but what does it mean? What is 'glory'? – what does it look like, feel like?

"The angel of the Lord came down

and glory shone around."

I think of a picture one of my children made when she was four or five which depicted that scene very literally and graphically – with an angel, three

shepherds, half a dozen sheep and *lots of glory* – bright orange streaks of it filling all the spaces across the whole sheet. Is that what it's like?

Now in fact in the Bible we find two different kinds of glory, though we use the same word for both. There is first of all ordinary human glory, though its meaning consists in being regarded as not ordinary.

The Greek word *doxa* which we translate as 'glory' means appearance, reputation, impressiveness. So a king has *doxa*, glory, majesty, because he's powerful and important, and everybody does what he says. His importance shows itself in wearing fine robes, with shiny gold and jewels. Nowadays rulers don't wear gold much, but they still wear shiny suits, and travel in shiny motorcades with sirens blaring, through flag-lined streets – so it's the same thing. It was this kind of glory – impressiveness – that Jesus was talking about when he pointed to the wild flowers, and said: "Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" [Matt 6: 29]. (Human attempts at impressiveness cannot match the beauty God scatters freely about the whole of creation.)

But in the Old Testament, in the Book of Exodus and elsewhere, there's a completely different kind of glory, especially found in the phrase 'the glory of the LORD'. The Hebrew word *kabod* which we translate 'glory' really means weight, substance, so 'the glory of the LORD' is not about God's reputation or impressiveness, or what people think about God, it's about what God *is*, the substance, intensity or depth of God – and that substance revealed among humans bringing good.

In Exodus 24 we read how Moses went up Mount Sinai to meet God, and we're told "The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days". So the glory of the LORD is a bit like a cloud. And then we're told, "The appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain". Notice that it says "the appearance ... was like": the glory *is not* a devouring fire, but it may look like one – especially if you're waiting anxiously at the foot of the mountain to see what becomes of your leader. [Ex 24: 15-17]

So, a devouring fire in the midst of a cloud, that's how it seems: like the luminous cloud which covered the tabernacle and led the Israelites through the desert –" a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day" [Ex 13: 21, 40: 34].

But *all* the texts emphasise that this is only how the glory of the LORD *appears*: what it *is*, is GOD, and you can't describe GOD. The real glory is GOD and what God does for those God loves.

When the Israelites were given manna-bread in the wilderness, we're told they "saw the glory of the LORD". And when Jesus restored Lazarus to life, Jesus said to his sister, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" [John 11: 4, 40].

There's nothing here about cloud or fire, but there is an overshadowing awe. The *glory of God* is God making a covenant of mercy with the people, giving bread in the desert, raising the dead to life. St Paul says, "Christ was raised from the dead *by the glory of the Father*" [Rom 6: 4]. That's an odd expression if you think about it, where 'glory' has nothing to do with physical appearance but seems to mean God's power or love, and the awe which that inspires.

The Letter to the Hebrews says Jesus is "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" – like a light shining in a mirror, or an impression stamped into wax, Jesus *is* whatever God is; and what God is, is *glory*.

It was *this* kind of glory which shone around the shepherds in Luke's story, as they watched over their flocks, and they were *terrified*.

Whereas the glory of kings and presidents makes you want to stand up and cheer and wave flags and throw your cap into the air, this kind of glory reduces you to silence and holy awe.

"Fear not, said he, for mighty dread

Had seized their troubled mind;

Glad tidings of great joy I bring

To you and all mankind".

3

As St Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, he goes out of his way to contrast these two kinds of glory, the human glory of kings and rulers and the mysterious, awe-inspiring "glory of God" which is life-bringing.

The first kind appears when we're told 'In those days a decree went out from the emperor Augustus that all the world should be enrolled". How nice to be an emperor, to wallow in your bath and think "What shall I do today? – I know, I'll issue a decree". So secretaries are summoned to draft your words of command, scribes are set to copying it out a hundred times, and all over the empire people are stirred up to go and be registered, while you lie back in your bath and think, What next?

Likewise Quirinius the Governor of Syria who also comes into the story: known to history as the magnificently titled Publius Sulpicius Quirinius, hero of military campaigns in Asia Minor and North Africa, now laden with honours and installed as Roman legate and Governor of Syria, overseeing the outworking of the emperor's decree from the distant comfort of his palace. As Humpty Dumpty would say: There's glory for you. But the *glory of God* appears, not in these illustrious public figures wielding power, but in an insignificant couple making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem in outward obedience to the emperor's decree, but really to fulfil a destiny laid down by God, with a purpose of which the emperor has never dreamt.

And the glory of God appears where later the child of these travellers lies in a feeding-trough in somebody's cottage or cowshed, and when rough shepherds recognise that *this child* is God's messiah, sent to bring about peace – God's peace, infinitely wider and deeper than the Pax Romana, the suppression of violence achieved by Augustus, Quirinius and their armies.

4

We see the two kinds of glory contrasted also in our Christmas celebrations. On the one hand there is 'Christmas night with the stars', all that glamour and

showbiz glitz and glitter, all that tinsel and shiny wrapping paper. On the other hand, beneath that, there are the real deep symbols by which we struggle to express our wonder at the incarnation and what it means:

- Candles meaning light coming into darkness;
- The tree, meaning new life springing up in the dead time of the year;
- The gifts by which we imitate God's great gift,
- and the surprise and wonder which we instinctively weave around the story of Jesus, and the story of Santa Claus.

All these are at bottom (if you can see the tree beneath the tinsel) real responses to God's glory. And so, perhaps surprisingly, is the Queen's speech. In the 1930s, when King George V first made a Christmas radio broadcast to the nation, he rightly saw the meaning of Christmas expressed in a Christian monarch setting aside earthly glory and aloofness and taking time on Christmas Day to speak to his people in the intimacy of their living rooms. Last year's film "The King's Speech" made us aware of the human cost of that openness, for his son. Of course the event has now long lost its surprise and its freshness, but the inspiration is still true.

The contrast between the two notions of glory also appears in the way we give gifts. Do we let commercial pressures encourage us to act like kings or millionaires, at Christmas time, who can spend money like water? Or do we know the reality of glory is found in simple gifts given with care and love?

We must be aware that in the Bible the glory of God always comes as a surprising response to human need – bread in the wilderness, life out of death – and we rightly sense at this season that God's heart is open to those who are sad or lonely or distressed – those who often find the glitzy side of Christmas (the superficial glory) only makes them feel worse.

It's to the sad and the needy that God's heart is especially open at this time, and I hope ours are too, as we remember that the real glory of God is the infinite compassion through which God's son comes into this hurting world, and a hint of that glory is seen in the compassion which arises in our hearts in the face of real human needs.

May we enjoy Christmas as those who know its real meaning and its real joy.